

Island hospitals shift strategies as vaccine interest slows

By KELSEY WALLING Hawaii Tribune-Herald | Thursday, May 6, 2021, 12:05 a.m.



Some Big Island hospitals are changing the way they are offering COVID-19 vaccinations as demand slows in Hawaii and throughout the nation.

While the U.S. averaged 3.38 million doses administered per day during a week in mid-April, the current seven-day average is 2.19 million doses per day, according to the U.S. Centers of Disease Control and Prevention. The most recent numbers as of Wednesday show daily vaccinations have

dropped by nearly 20% from last week.

In Hawaii County, about 50% of people have received at least one shot and 38% are fully vaccinated.

Health experts say 70%-85% of the nation will need to be immune, either through previous infection or vaccination, to reach herd immunity.

Queen's North Hawaii Community Hospital in Waimea acknowledged it has been experiencing vaccine reluctance.

The hospital can administer 200 doses of the Pfizer vaccine a day, but is often scheduling fewer people.

"Nothing we're experiencing is unique to us. This issue is happening everywhere," said spokeswoman Lynn Scully. "Some groups are taking the vaccines to the communities, which has helped for some on the fence. The truth is, there will always be a small portion who will never get the vaccine."

To help alleviate one of the barriers to inoculation, the hospital on Wednesday offered shots for those 16 and older with no appointment necessary.

"Some people aren't comfortable making appointments or don't have time to go when we normally offer them," Scully said. "We're all trying to figure out what works, so making vaccines more accessible could be helpful."

QNHCH is trying to reach out to people who are vaccine-hesitant to help encourage them to ask questions and consider getting inoculated.

"We went out to Parker Ranch and vaccinated a group there, which was successful," Scully said. "I think it's important to keep going and to help alleviate any barriers that may be in someone's way."

Hilo Medical Center also is experiencing reduced demand for vaccinations.

"It's really important to approach different age groups with different perspectives," said Kris Wilson, assistant hospital administrator. "We want to look at more opportunities to better educate people on the importance of the vaccine, and that it's their time to make a difference."

More specifically, HMC plans to reach out to younger people, who are the most reluctant to get inoculated.

"We've seen major hesitancy from people 18-36 years old," Wilson said. "I think a lot of the concern is not high in this age group because they didn't see their peers get infected with COVID-19."

There was a big push to vaccinate kupuna in the beginning of vaccine rollout, but HMC now is shifting its messaging.

"One thing we noticed with high school students is that they want to listen to each other and hear from their own peers," Wilson said. "We want to take more videos and photos of students getting vaccinated and put it on social media, where it could be shared more widely."

HMC officials also are hoping that the use of vaccine passports for interisland travel starting May 11 and the prospect of summer vacations will help garner more interest from the younger population.

Although vaccinations have been slowing down, HMC has administered more than 37,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine, and 90% of people who participated in any of the HMC PODs, or points of dispensing, have received both doses of the vaccine.

HMC will host its last mass vaccination POD on Saturday, May 15, at the Edith Kanakaole Multi-Purpose Stadium in Hilo.

Staff are currently prescheduling appointments for children 12 years and older for that POD.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is expected to authorize the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine for children ages 12-15 years old, a decision that could come by some time early next week. The vaccine currently is authorized only for people age 16 and older.

"We want to be proactive with this rollout, and we're pretty hopeful that we'll have (approval) to vaccinate everyone 12 years and older," Wilson said. "This will open up opportunities for whole families to be vaccinated, which should give us a bump in numbers."

Anyone seeking to schedule vaccination appointments can do so on the Hawaii County website at <https://coronavirus-response-county-of-hawaii-hawaiicountygis.hub.arcgis.com/pages/vaccine-information>.

All of the vaccination sites available in Hawaii County are listed on the site with emails, phone numbers and registration instructions.

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